DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 125 024 CS 501 430

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TITLE Speech Communication as Career Preparation.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Convention of the Communication Association of the Pacific (Kobe, Japan, June 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Science Research; *Business; *Career Choice; *Career Opportunities; Career Planning; *Communication Skills; *Health; Higher Education; *Industry; Literature Reviews
IDENTIFIERS *Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the uses that students can make of knowledge and skills in speech communication and brings together representative evidence concerning communicative abilities and employment and comment on the improvement in public understanding of the field. The unifying aim is to provide a rationale for speech communication as career preparation, and this is accomplished by reviewing several studies on the communication needs of business, industry, and health-related agencies. (RB)

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SPEECH COMMUNICATION AS CAREER PREPARATION

by James H. McBath*

Nearly everyone associated with higher education holds a view of its expected outcomes; these expectations, of course, often differ. It would be too much to assume close agreement among the anticipations of trustees, alumni, parents, administrators, and faculty. There are many who simply believe that college is a Fine Thing, without much thought as to its purposes. Students, on the other hand, are intensely interested in the uses of their education. In his national sampling of youth, Daniel Yankelovich found that the "dominant theme of today's college climate" might be the effort of students to achieve a synthesis of self-fulfillment and a successful career.[1]

This paper will examine the uses that students can make of knowledge and skills in speech communication. It will bring together representative evidence concerning communicative abilities and employment and comment on the improvement in public understanding of our field. The unifying aim is to provide a rationale for speech communication as career preparation.

Let us begin by reviewing some empirical data about communication skills and career requirements. A number of studies conducted during the past few years have focused on competencies required in business, industry, and the professions. These studies are broadly representative of different populations in various non-academic settings.

A survey of the communication needs of business, industry, and

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health-related agencies of metropolitan Buffalo, New York,[2] showed a remarkable agreement on the uses of oral and written communication skills. The rank order of communication abilities utilized by responding groups showed the following:

	Industry	Business	Health-related
1.	Report Writing	Oral Reporting	Report Writing
2.	Oral Reporting	Report Writing	Oral Reporting
3.	Organizational Development Training	Development and Analysis of Surveys	Film Evaluation
4.	Development and Analysis of Surveys	Speech Writing, Analysis and Training	Speech Writing, Analysis and Training
5.	Speech Writing, Analysis and Training	Public Opinion Assessment	Organizational Development Training
6.	Media Impact Analysis	Media Impact Analysis	Parliamentary Procedure

A study conducted for the Western College Placement Association provides insight into the attitudes of employers.[3] The survey sample contained 114 college recruiting officers and managers from 17 different industry groupings. These personnel recruiters have hired more than 75 per cent of college graduates for their firms since 1972. As might be expected, business and engineering majors received the highest rankings in choice of applicants. However, within the liberal arts, only communication majors received a positive rating from the majority of employer groups. Fine arts and humanities received no positive ratings, while social science was awarded positive ratings by only three of the 17 employer groups. On the other hand, communication majors were given positive ratings by industry groups that included automotive; banking, finance, and insurance; building

materials and construction; food and beverage; municipal and state government; federal government; merchandising; consulting; and utilities. Besides the relative appeal of the major within the liberal arts, two other factors would seem to assist the speech communication student. First is the likelihood of better performance in interview situations. "Of critical concern to a majority of recruiting officers," said the researchers, "is the results of the face to face initial interview with the applicant."[4] Second is the positive rating assigned to extracurricular activities, including speech and dramatics.

A comprehensive study of educational requirements in business and industry was undertaken several years ago in Pennsylvania.[5] The study inquired into educational needs as perceived by 3,620 managers and supervisors. Three levels of management (top managers, middle managers, and first-line supervisors) evaluated educational needs on a three-point scale: "should have," "could use," and "don't really need." The subjects seen as "should have" by 50 per cent or more of 705 top managers were:

	Percent
Communication in the organization	59
Management development	53
Long-range planning and forcasting for corporate growth	50
Overall strategy and goals	50
Effective written communication	50
Effective speaking	50

Top management also was asked to identify those subjects which they believed were the educational needs of those they supervised.

	Percent
Effective written communication	74
Effective speaking	67
Working efficiently with individuals and groups	66
Communication in the organization	65
Effective reading skills	62
Listening skills	61

The chief recommendation for higher education is noteworthy: "The need for additional training in the area of communications--such subjects as report writing, effective speaking, conference leadership--is strong for all three levels of management and also for those supervised by top and middle management. The university should expand its programs in this field and make them available at locations convenient to business and industry."[6]

California executives confirmed that the ability to communicate effectively is significant in the movement of persons to top management positions. Companies chosen for the study were the 58 California-based corporations among Fortune's 500 largest U. S. Industrial Corporations. Questionnaires went to top executives, mainly vice-presidents, the majority of whom responded. Sixty-six percent of the respondents indicated that "effective communication skills" had played a "major part" in their advancement. The investigator concluded: "Oral communication skills seemed slightly more important than written skills for these executives. Ninety-four percent said they used oral communication skills extensively in their present positions, while 6 percent said they used them occasionally, and none said rarely."[7]

In 1973 the Department of Industrial Administration at Iowa State University conducted a study of its alumni and graduating seniors to provide information useful in evaluating advisement services of the department.[8] Questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of the 2,755 graduated from the department from 1952 through 1972. The response options permitted assessment of knowledge in the area as "not useful at all" (1), "only slightly useful" (2), or "very important" (3). The ratings of "usefulness of areas of coursework offered by other departments" are displayed in the following table:

Alumni		Graduating Seniors	
Course	Mean	Course	Mean
English	2.71	Economics	2.53
Speech	2.70	English	2.48
Economics	2.57	Speech	2.47
Mathematics	2.49	Computer Sciences	2.39
Computer Sciences	2.49	Statistics	2.30
Statistics	2.35	Mathematics	2.16
Psychology	2.22	Psychology	1.95
Industrial Engineering	2.13	Industrial Engineering	1.91

Academic areas receiving lower ratings than those listed above were sociology, journalism and advertising, political science, history, philosophy, chemistry, physics, and other subject areas of the liberal arts.

Business and engineering graduates of Ohio University were polled about the nature of their first jobs and their academic preparation for such positions. The study revealed that "in most cases entry job level employees are more active in implementing oral communication skills than

written communication skills."[9] Moreover, "as an individual moves up in the organizational hierarchy, his communication skills expertise will be challenged by more complex communication problems." Responses to open-ended questions suggested that respondents would have felt better prepared with more work in spoken and written communication, particularly in oral reporting.

One final study looks to the future. It is a recent Delphi inquiry into the communication competencies likely to be needed by persons in business in the year 1980.[10] Because participants in the study were drawn from academe, the results may reflect what is likely to be taught to prospective business persons as much as reveal competencies required by the business community in the next decade. The top ten competencies in their order of rank were:

1. Understand that we never have complete control over how our messages may be interpreted.
2. Deal constructively with conflict situations that arise within the organization.
3. Communicate laterally within an organization.
4. Communicate downward within an organization.
5. Communicate upward within an organization.
6. Solicit feedback from those with whom he communicates.
7. Recognize the tendency of subordinates not to express their negative reactions to problems.
8. Recognize the effects of power and status differences on communication behaviors.
9. Recognize both the social and task-oriented needs of groups.
10. Recognize that meaning is in people.

Since this list represents contributions of persons currently teaching business and organizational communication, we can reasonably assume that

these or similar topics will continue to be emphasized in their courses. The topics are broadly representative of the negotiable knowledge about human behavior that should undergird instruction in spoken and written communication.

The concept of training for flexibility in career choices is gaining support from educators and policy makers. There is a great deal of career indecision during students' educational development. High proportions of both men and women shift in and out of various occupational grouping during their undergraduate years. The proportion of undergraduate college men who hold the same career plans as freshman and as college seniors ranges from a high of 56% (school teacher) to a low of 7% (mathematician). A national study of career outcomes of liberal arts graduates, sponsored by the American Council on Education, concluded: "Students typically do not come to college with clear ideas about their career future; over half change plans during the four or five years of undergraduate study."[11]

It would appear, therefore, that the kind of college education most useful to undergraduates is responsive both to their early career indecision and to the labor market fluctuation. Such an education will be general rather than specialized. The curriculum should foster development of abilities that are important across fields and occupations--competence in written and spoken communication, in mathematics, languages, as well as interpersonal skills and skills in systematic inquiry.

Clifton R. Wharton, president of Michigan State University, makes the point that "general education itself is a crucial sort of job preparation."

> In the United States there has long been a high degree of movement between jobs that are significantly different in nature, as in the case of the engineer who enters management. The career skills a man or woman learns prior to accepting a first or second position may be inadequate for a third, fourth, or fifth job.

> General education, concentrating on developing a broad cultural perspective, analytic abilities, and communicative skills, enriches our personal lives and enhances our adaptibility to new situations. This general education is indispensable to the world of work as any program of vocational training.[12]

Dr. Wharton underscores our thesis: that general or liberal education is the most reliable career preparation. His point is in harmony with a definition of liberal education offered by Robert Hutchins:

> The liberal arts are the arts of communication and the arts of using the mind. They are the arts of indispensable to further learning, for they are the arts of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and figuring. They have a timeless quality, for they are indispensable no matter what happens in any state of the world.[13]

Near the beginning of the essay, we asserted that college students today are concerned about careers, though the eventual career decision may not be made until late in the higher education process. We then suggested that the uncertainty of career direction--to say nothing of industrial and technological change--recommended studies in basic, general, or liberal skills. Finally, we suggested that the fundamental skills included, most importantly, those of written and spoken communication. In addition, evidence shows that in major areas of non-academic employment (e.g., business, industry, government, and professions) abilities fostered by study in speech communication are prized. Surprisingly, however, these abilities often are not associated with speech communication instruction.

Perhaps no academic field is understood outside the academy as its members wish or intend it to be. Professional studies probably are comprehended more easily and accurately than are liberal studies. So speech communication has considerable company in stereotype. Still, it is annoying to hear about outdated notions such as those held by employers in the Greater Houston area: "Speech communication majors . . . are still viewed

as studying voice and diction and platform presentation."[14] Similar attitudes were reported in a survey of employment counselors in Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska.[15] Just as serious is the fact that colleagues in higher education often are little better informed than are laymen of the content of speech communication study.

Several current efforts should assist in informing persons inside and outside the academy about speech communication study. First, studies such as those discussed in this paper are helping to improve public understanding of the nature and purposes of our field. Second, Speech Communication and Careers, prepared by the Association for Communication Administration, describes instructional, research, and applied aspects of the field. Although designed primarily for potential students, the brochure is also addressed to prospective employers. Third, there is fresh interest within the Speech Communication Association in the concerns of applied communication professionals. Recent SCA publications discuss[16] the uses of communication knowledge and skills in non-academic settings. Fourth, work by speech communication scholars on the new educational taxonomy should improve understanding of the content of the field. The two-year project, sponsored by the National Center for Educational Statistics, will define the subject matter of all educational fields pre-kindergarten through post-doctoral. The taxonomy is intended to supplant those presently in use and to provide authoritative definitions for the next decade.

In an age of accelerating social and technological change, the most durable career preparation is to be found in liberal education, particularly in studies possessing generative ability, i.e., those whose concepts and skills can be applied to other subject matter. A former president of the National Education Association expressed this concept in the following

way: "No college freshman can project 25 years to decide what he needs to learn--subject matter is easily forgotten and in today's world, the knowledge explosion makes constant learning an inevitability. But all adults today need to be able to communicate with clarity, to articulate ideas, to reason, to separate key facts from the barrage of ideas we all are exposed to every day."[17] Because speech communication study contributes to such preparation, the field serves admirably as both immediate and long-term career preparation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Daniel Yankelovich, reported in Chronicle of Higher Education, VIII (May 28, 1974), 3.

2. Report of Manpower Resources Study Committee (presented at the International Communication Association Convention, April 23, 1975, Chicago, Illinois).

3. Jane L. Anton and Michael L. Russell, Employer Attitudes and Opinions Regarding Potential College Graduate Employees (Hayward, California: Western College Placement Association Research Committee, 1974).

4. Anton and Russell, p. 7.

5. Samuel S. Dubin, Everett Alderman, and H. Leroy Marlow, Managerial and Supervisory Educational Needs of Business and Industry in Pennsylvania (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1967).

6. Dubin, Alderman and Marlow, p. 8.

7. James C. Bennett, "The Communication Needs of Business Executives," Journal of Business Communication, VIII (Spring, 1971), 8.

8. Barbara A. Magill, Roger P. Murphy, and Lilian O. Feinberg, "Industrial Administration Survey Shows Need for Communication Study," The American Business Communication Association Bulletin, XXXVIII (June, 1975), 31-33.

9. Jon M. Huegli and Harvey D. Tschirgi, "An Investigation of Communication Skills Application and Effectiveness at the Entry Job Level," Journal of Business Communication, XII (Fall, 1974), 26.

10. Christopher Spicer, "The Identification of Communication Competencies Required by Future Businesspersons: An Application of the Delphi Method" (paper delivered at the International Communication Association Convention, April 1975, Chicago, Illinois).

11. Ann Stouffer Bisconti and Irene L. Gomberg, The Hard-to-Place Majority (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: The CPC Foundation, 1975), p. 24.

12. Clifton R. Wharton, "Education and the Job Market," Science, CLXXXV (August, 1974), 571.

13. Robert M. Hutchins, "On Political Maturity," Change, VI (November, 1974), 32.

14. Robert L. Heath, "Employer Images of Speech Communication Majors: A Question of Employability," Bulletin of the Association for Communication Administration, XV (January, 1976), 16.

15. See Diane Lee Lockwood and Sara Boatman, "Marketability: Who

Needs Us and What Can We Do For Them?" (paper delivered at the Central States Speech Association Convention, April 12, 1975, Kansas City, Missouri).

16. See, for example, James H. McBath and David T. Burhans, Jr., Communication Education for Careers (Falls Church, Virginia: Speech Communication Association, 1975). The book assesses career potentials of communication education, identifies factors that inhibit and promote such education, and recommends strategies for career planning.

17. Helen M. Wise in James H. McBath, ed., Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Co., 1975), p. 82.